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Misrepresenting Climate Change: Deconstructing New Media Discourse Through the Case Study of Hurricane Irma

Amy Dickens

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Cultural Studies Program
Departments of English and Creative Writing and
Humanities, History, and Social Sciences
Columbia College Chicago
Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

Thesis Approval Form

Student Name: Amy Dickens

Thesis Title: Misrepresenting Climate Change: Deconstructing
News Media Discourse Through the Case Study of Hurricane Irma

Name

Signature

Date

Douglas Reichert Powell, PhD  5/11/18
Thesis Director


Program Director


Department Chair



**Misrepresenting Climate Change:
Deconstructing News Media Discourse Through the
Case Study of Hurricane Irma**

By

Amy Dickens

**Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies**

**Cultural Studies Program
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ABSTRACT

This project uses critical discourse analysis to understand the relationship between U.S. news media coverage on natural disasters like Hurricane Irma and the ideological implications of that coverage. More specifically, in news media discourse, personification of natural disasters alienates humans from their actions, many of which are actively aiding in the advancement of anthropogenic climate change. By taking an in depth look at how various factors come into play, like the humans vs. nature binary, the polarization of American politics around climate change, and various news media framings, the essay demonstrates that the personification of Irma is both the result of and reinforcement of climate change misrepresentation in news media.

KEYWORDS

news media; climate change; critical discourse analysis; Hurricane Irma; natural disaster; communication; skepticism; personification

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
How Current News Media Frames Climate Change	9
Polarized Politics	13
Humans vs. Nature	16
History of Naming Hurricanes	19
Methodology	21
Personification of Irma	25
If They Could They Would Call Irma a “Bitch”	28
Irma as “Demonic Other”	31
Irma as Perpetrator and Humans as Victim	33
Conclusion: Complex Problems Require Complex Solutions	38
Works Cited	44

“Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it.

The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as *ab*-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.”

-William Cronon “The Trouble With Wilderness”-
(85)

INTRODUCTION

Anthropogenic¹ climate change is our objective reality in contemporary times. Much like the objective truth that all living beings breathe, our planet's climate is changing because of our exploitive, careless actions, yet we rarely take the time to stop and notice our breath, let alone the current state of our environment. Although climate change has been on our radar for nearly 50 years, the production of doubt around the existence and anthropogenic causes of climate change are seemingly more rampant in society than ever. This is a strategic tactic of capitalist, right-wing think tanks and mega corporations that are attempting to stall any progress on climate change adaptations and mitigations by keeping the conversation stuck on the existence of climate change rather than moving on to *how* to fight climate change.

This problem partially results from miscommunication among journalists, politicians and economists, misinterpreting and misrepresenting the use of the term “uncertainty” within a scientific context. Uncertainty in the world of climate science refers to the uncertainty about the extent of the possible manifestations of climate change, not uncertainty about the existence of anthropogenic climate change. This manipulation of scientific uncertainty has resulted in 49% of the U.S. population (in 2011, compared to 28% in 2000) being skeptical about climate change (Callison 134). This uncertainty continues to exist despite the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finding *no* climate scientists out of 928 peer-reviewed scientific papers between 1993 and 2003 who disagreed with the consensus on climate change (Callison 3; Oreskes 1). One aspect of this project is to unveil and explore why and how, despite the overwhelming scientific

¹ Anthropogenic causes: environmental damage resulting primarily from human activities.

consensus over a prolonged period of time, climate denialism prevails in contemporary society?

While climate skepticism and denialism are important to address for this project, it is even more important to address the role of uncertainty in the community of people who do in fact believe in anthropogenic climate change, yet have still subscribed to this misunderstanding of climate uncertainty that penetrates the majority of climate change communication outside of the world of climate experts. In a study by John D. Sterman and Linda Booth Sweeney on “public complacency about climate change”, graduate students from MIT were tested on their understandings of climate change and how it can be mitigated. Results showed a vast misunderstanding of basic “stock and flow relationships”² (Sterman and Sweeney 213). Sterman and Sweeney found that “large majorities [of anthropogenic climate believers] oppose mitigation policies such as energy taxes (Leiserowitz 2003; O’Connor et al. 1999).../... Nearly 60% chose either “until we are sure that global warming is really a problem, we should not take any steps that would have economic costs” or “its effects will be gradual, so we can deal with the problem gradually” (Kull 2001). (Sterman and Sweeney 214). Eradicating climate skeptics entirely would be a tremendous accomplishment in favor of mitigating climate change. However, simply converting all skeptics to understand and believe in climate change to the level that most climate believers currently operate within would not be enough to put our society on a path towards the eradication of climate change.

² Stock and flow relationships “can be understood using a bathtub analogy in which the water level represents the stock atmosphere CO₂.” (Sterman and Sweeney 221). Like the water level in a tub, if the level of water flowing in (or CO₂ input into atmosphere) exceeds the level of water draining (or CO₂ output/CO₂ absorbed into trees etc.) we find that the water overflows the finite capacity of the tub, resulting in negative consequences.

The media is one of the most powerful tools of ideological manipulation in the United States today, and thus holds the power to construct and influence nearly every aspect of our realities. The ways in which today's news media frames climate change severely misrepresents the magnitude of the impending situation. By neglecting to address the necessary context of climate change's role in the very disasters they exploit, media discourse has successfully constructed and contributed to dominant ideologies that are damaging to the cultural understanding of the precedent of climate change.

For this project I have focused on the news coverage of Hurricane Irma that hit the United States with minimal mainstream news coverage providing the crucial context of anthropogenic climate change for the situation. While this project specifically focuses on the *misrepresentation* of climate change in news media, rather than the *underrepresentation*, it is important to note the grave importance and thus need for a greater abundance of news media coverage on climate change and relating issues. The notion of *underrepresentation* is supported by the Quantity of Coverage theory. The Quantity of Coverage theory supports that increases in individual concern over specific issues are directly correlated with increased news coverage (Brulle et al. 185). That being said while a greater quantity of coverage is necessary, there are greater complexities to explore regarding the problem of the *misrepresentation* of climate change.

Finding a greater understanding of these complexities behind climate misrepresentation is necessary to acknowledge and repair in order for the solution to underrepresentation to have a positive impact on the environment. U.S. news media discourse, given its integral role in dispersing and constructing knowledge, belief systems and cultural "common sense" notions, will thus be the primary institutional focus to

explore the cultural misrepresentations and misunderstandings of climate change. More specifically, this concept will be explored through the textual sample of Hurricane Irma articles in news media, upon which it was found that personifying Hurricane Irma (and more generally hurricanes) is a common tactic to further alienate U.S. citizens from how their personal actions directly connect and contribute to climate change, and thus the Hurricanes that plague them.

Climate change becomes politicized so seamlessly in today's political climate, thus most articles looking at the intersection of media and climate coverage have politics embedded throughout the conversation. Scholars have come to a consensus that the media has helped to successfully falsely construct climate change as a debate in the minds of America via the journalistic value of "balanced reporting", which has ultimately lead to biased reports (and understandings) of climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff 134). Capitalist ideologies that blindly value economic profit combined with the tendency of the media to translate scientific results to fit preconceived notions of the world that support climate uncertainty have greatly contributed to this mass misunderstanding of climate change in our society.

Where this project aims to fill in the gaps of the ongoing conversation about the politics of climate change and news media coverage is by asking:

- Why isn't news media discourse addressing the larger context of climate change within the coverage of natural disasters, specifically Hurricane Irma? Why is this important to address now?
- How is news media falsely constructing climate change as a scientific debate, and what impact is that having on both public and political perspectives of the relation

between human actions, natural disasters, and climate change within the context of Hurricane Irma?

Climate change, being one of the biggest problems we will face in our lives, should be at the forefront of political conversations as well as properly understood by the masses as such in order to sufficiently combat such a complex social, political and environmental problem. News media, being by far the dominant method of obtaining current events information, thus has an incredibly huge responsibility of properly educating and communicating to the public the reality of issues like climate change. Upon deeper analysis of the texts for this project as well as an extensive look at secondary research on the relations between climate uncertainty and news media, it is apparent that the media have contributed to the unethical, immoral platform of climate uncertainty that seeps into and persists within many American's ideological belief systems.

The personification of Hurricane Irma in U.S. news media discourse is a tool of power that contributes to the alienation of humans from the consequences of our actions within nature such as the increased intensity of hurricanes as a result of anthropogenic climate change. This personification actively aids in labeling Hurricane Irma as a scapegoat for "her" destruction, rather than motivating audiences to understand that their unsustainable actions and lifestyles are directly responsible for climate change, which is linked to an increased intensity of catastrophic hurricanes, like Hurricane Irma.

HOW CURRENT NEWS MEDIA FRAMES CLIMATE CHANGE

While the scientific community represents the most accurate information on this issue, the media holds the select power to communicate and shape our perceptions

regarding climate change. Craig Trumbo's article, "Constructing Climate Change: Claims and Frames in US News Coverage of an Environmental Issue" found a correlation between media coverage of climate change and public concern for climate change; indicating that the current framing of climate change is failing to construct the necessary urgency that climate change requires, in order for people to prioritize it appropriately in their lives (Trumbo 280-281). This is integrally related to the role of journalistic norms and values that lay the foundation for guidelines that journalists use to discuss all matters, including climate change. Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff's article, "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the US Prestige Press," analyzes the problem of the journalist value of "balance" in the case of climate change, becoming "bias" in favor of climate skepticism (Boykoff and Boykoff 134). This bias has led to the popularization of the illusion of a debate on the existence of anthropogenic climate change, when within the scientific community that debate does not exist. This bias, manufactured by the media, has led to the false consensus among the public that climate change is a debate in the scientific world, when that is certainly not the case.

It's critical to the central purpose of this project to understand this notion of the *completely false construction* of the entire climate denialism/uncertainty debate. While journalistic values and norms exist primarily to set standards in order to primarily prevent any tendency towards biased, false reporting and representation of the facts, it's clear that in the case of climate change, "balanced" reporting predominantly aims (and succeeds at) normalizing, dehistoricizing and depoliticizing a deeply politically motivated issue. "This bias, hidden behind the veil of journalistic balance, creates both discursive and real

political space for the US government to shirk responsibility and delay action regarding global warming.” (Boykoff and Boykoff 134).

When journalists participate in this “balanced” reporting in climate change they are simultaneously participating in the production of doubt around climate change. “One reason that the public is confused is that people have been trying to confuse them, in large part by intentionally waging campaigns of doubt against climate science.” (Oreskes 686). Naomi Oreskes film, “Merchants of Doubt”³, discusses the integral notion of climate support not being about the data, but rather being primarily about the “tribe” of political ideologies that people blindly subscribe to. Understanding the power behind the way in which information is presented and manipulated by the media, specifically in contexts where it is presented as unbiased, “neutral” information such as in news media, will hopefully allow for the necessary changes in contemporary climate communication to finally achieve a point where belief in climate change becomes “common sense” or part of the dominant ideology.

While this project focuses specifically on print news media, the influence of broadcast news media is also important to consider contextually for the scope of how society understands climate change. According to a yearly analysis titled “How Broadcast TV Networks Covered Climate Change in 2017”, although 2017 broke multiple records for natural disasters, only 4 segments were aired throughout the entire year that highlighted the connection between climate change and natural disasters (Kalhoefer 1). Climate change necessitates a position at the forefront of political conversations, yet there was not a single report aired on how the 2016 presidential election could impact climate

³ Based on the book “Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming” by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway.

change *before* election day (Kalhoefer 4). Informed voters are crucial in the fight against climate change as well as other public policy concerns, and leaving society uninformed on the essential points of issues leads to widespread issues of ignorance and complacency regarding issues that need fundamental changes. Print news media overall did a better job of representing the contextual context and importance of climate change to natural disasters like Hurricane Irma, but this analysis of broadcast news media represents the overall lenses and representations through which society's beliefs on climate change are heavily influenced.

The predominant the role of news media discourse is to distribute knowledge. It would be ignorant to presume that knowledge claims made by news media are without their ideological influences and biases. Expanding on this notion of the conservative party's bias towards exploitive profit growth, there is a correlated growth in power when conservative ideological knowledge is consumed and consented to, often in the form of news media. It is important to note that even Democrats are easily influenced (although to a lesser extent) by climate denialist campaigns, which is evidence of the ideological power at play here (Dunlap et al. 10). While this project focuses primarily on the public misunderstanding of information on climate change resulting from misrepresentation and underrepresentation of the facts, it is important to note that this is not just a knowledge-deficit problem in U.S. society. The problem of lack of public understanding of climate change results from various complex political, social, and ideological issues that all need to be addressed, unpacked and understood in order to recreate our society's relationship to the environment to be more conducive to a symbiotic relationship rather than an exploitive one.

This project primarily takes an in depth look at news media discourse as well as discourses surrounding climate uncertainty, understanding the role that discourse has in constantly enabling and constraining people to think in a certain way. This constant enabling and constraining pressure on society makes the audience of discourses the subjects. This subjectivity ultimately creates power, through the manipulation and use of knowledge displayed in discourse. “Discourses produce knowledge and knowledge is always a weapon of power.” (Storey 132). Today it would not be seen as an outlandish claim in many circles, to say that news media has obtained a considerable amount of power within U.S. society. News media’s framing of these issues uses knowledge as a tool of power (whether consciously or subconsciously done). Recognizing this is key to understanding our society’s struggle to make progress on climate change.

POLARIZED POLITICS

The predominant binary that influences every aspect of this project, climate change, and politics in general is that of the increasingly polarized political ideological binary. While party affiliation in the U.S. traditionally existed as more of a spectrum of sorts, in recent years party affiliation has come to be a primary source of social identity, thus simultaneously solidifying and further polarizing the binary. Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster argue that this polarization has led to “negative partisanship” or in other words, “supporters of each party have come to perceive supporters of the opposing party as very different from themselves in terms of their social characteristics, political beliefs, and values and to view opposing partisans with growing suspicion and hostility” (Dunlap et al. 6). From a social psychology perspective, “humans are inherently

motivated to maintain and protect group identities. As a consequence, identity-affirming ideologies tend to predict attitudes on issues such as climate change more strongly and reliably” (Guy et al. 422).

Rather than being passionate believers in the causes that each respective party supports, the primary concern for each party has come to be a pathological competitive need to stop the opposing (operative word being opposing, as it signifies a binary) party from gaining any ground on any particular issue. Studies have shown that while both parties are certainly guilty of this over-simplistic competitive way of governing, the conservative party has become much more extremist in their beliefs and actions than the left. This is supported by the creation and widespread, concealed influence of the “shadow GOP” (Dunlap et al. 6). This “shadow GOP” is made up of “conservative mega donors” that back Republican politicians as well as push extreme right-wing, pro-big business agendas on these politicians in order to fuel these exploitive, money making industries (Dunlap et al. 6).

While political polarization exists on nearly every topic imaginable out there, this polarization is the *extremely* pervasive on environmental issues like climate change. The results in the following graph demonstrate this polarizing divide around climate change. By paying particular attention to the “Percent Difference” column, one can easily come to the conclusion that there is a problematic misunderstanding within the conservative party on climate change in order to have such a gap in agreement with environmental issues.

Table 2. Global Warming Views of Conservative Republicans and Liberal Democrats in 2016 (Percent)			
	Conservative Republicans (n = 243)	Liberal Democrats (n = 224)	Percent Difference
Effects of global warming have already begun	30	89	59
Global warming due more to human activities	29	90	61
Global warming exaggerated in the news	72	7	65
Most scientists believe global warming is occurring	40	90	50
Global warming poses a serious threat in lifetime	17	66	49
Personally worry a great deal about global warming	14	67	53

(Dunlap et al. 15)

Other studies have replicated the results of the immense political divide on environmental issues in the U.S., and showed that political party affiliation is by far the dominant influencing factor on how individuals come to their “own” conclusions on climate change, proving to be much more influential than higher education or any other influencing factor (Hamilton et al. 1; Guy et al. 422; Brulle et al. 185; Shao and Goidel 2136). At the heart of this anti-environment stance or supposed disbelief in anthropogenic climate change is the die-hard conservative belief of prioritizing exponential profit growth over *all else*. As anthropogenic climate change is a direct result of these consumerist motivated actions, believing in anthropogenic climate change and actually making/supporting structural policy changes to mitigate the effects of climate change would be directly contradictory to the conservative party’s value of profit growth. This means that addressing climate change is directly oppositional to the Republican ideology as well as to conservative social identities, making it a deeply personal, ideological and material issue.

Ultimately, as this project operates within a news media discourse, it is important

to remember the contextual influence of news media as primarily a profit generating industry. Only secondarily to profit can news media be a tool to spread knowledge as we have all witnessed time and time again the collapse of various news media companies due to the failure to produce enough profit and not the failure to spread enough information. Thus, the intrinsic ties between news media discourse and capitalist ideology and the resulting influences both have on one another are central to understanding the root of this chronic problem that plagues environmental action with climate apathy, skepticism and denialism. These social labels were not produced in a vacuum and thus it is essential to understand the ways in which these identities were constructed by capitalist ideologies, news media discourses as well as the specific texts consumed by individuals such as the Hurricane Irma corpus this project focuses on.

HUMANS VS. NATURE

Dominant understandings in American popular culture of nature see nature as an often Edenic, sublime place of wilderness separate from where most “civilized” people live. This understanding of nature operates under the assumption that nature is static in a sense, miraculously continuously remaining a “stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid ‘disturbing’ it.” (Cronon 24). By viewing humans as objectively and unavoidably ‘toxic’ to nature our society has come to be reliant on this vastly misleading and problematic understanding of nature that unquestionably categorizes humans as separate from nature. This problematic understanding of nature also has allowed for natural resources from nature to be exploited by being mindlessly consumed by U.S. society to a

point of climate change inducing consequences. A central concept that is absolutely necessary to understand the complex exploitive relationships between humans and nature is the human vs. nature binary that stems from its capitalist foundation. This human vs. nature binary very clearly creates the illusion that humans are not in fact a part of nature, and presents a “non-human nature” in its place.

The very notion itself of nature is a social construction; note the moment “nature” was constructed in turn created the separation of humans and nature. This binary is problematic at its core as humans are intrinsically a part of nature and a crucial role in the balance of the ecosystem as a top predator animal of modernity. As we forget that *we are also nature*, we become increasingly alienated from “nature”, causing us to forget that the “human” spaces we occupy (like cities) are also inherently nature and that our consumption habits disrupt the fragile ecosystems of nature. This human alienation from the rest of nature is central to maintaining the human vs. nature binary in today’s society. By understanding nature as a “sacred”, “sublime” space away from humans, western society’s ways of defining nature increasingly “become[s] an unthinking and self-defeating form of cultural imperialism” (Cronon 73 & 82).

Although nature’s current ‘ideological home’ as the opposite of human is seemingly solidified, nature has a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that function within contemporary society⁴ in a variety of ways. It is important to remember that there is no nature that is untouched by humans, and no human that is untouched by nature. This aids us in beginning to recognize our identity as part of nature, in hopes of becoming connected and mindful of our actions and impact on nature. A more

⁴ These functions are defined by William Cronon as nature as: “naïve reality”, “moral imperative”, “eden”, “artifice”, “virtual reality”, “commodity”, and “demonic other” (Cronon 25-53).

environmentalist approach to defining nature is viewing it as “the material world *including* human beings.” (Benton-Short and Short 4). By operating within a definition like this one, society could potentially dismantle the humans vs. nature binary, and thus work to implement more sustainable mindsets and infrastructure throughout the U.S.

A generally accessible example through which to prove the construction of nature, is through the binary of rural vs. city (Cronon 7-8). Rural and city environments are equally human constructions, however society sees rural as “natural” and city as “man made” or “artificial”. We have learned a distinction between the two, a distinction that is so ingrained in our ways of seeing that we often don’t realize that one could not exist without the other to compare it to, thus they were constructed simultaneously. This “naturalness” of nature is a *habit of thought* as we cognitively place humans outside of nature, thus further cementing the binary.

The effects of this binary stem from but also heavily influence the complex relationships involved in capitalist ideological systems, contemporary social institutions, news media discourses and everyday human interactions as well as a seemingly endless plethora of other factors involved in U.S. cultural constructions. It is critical to bring the constantly changing context of culture into consideration, which then undoubtedly, ignites the constantly changing socially constructed meanings of everything in our society. This rapidly evolving and eternally transforming nature of the meaning making process, connects deeply with the push and pull process that happens with knowledge/power systems within discourse. An important point brought up by Noël Sturgeon in her book, *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*, is “calling something ‘natural’ places it in an arena of truth, inevitability, and immutability, beyond the reach of

social criticism or democratic dialogue.” (19). As dominant discourses entirely naturalize the toxic way we currently view nature, creating *regimes of truth*, humans become further and further alienated from nature in all its forms. Most importantly, we become alienated from the ecological impact of our actions. Although our careless consumeristic actions do have very large effects on nature, nothing about these effects is “natural”, and thus should *never* be treated as such to normalize or justify our harmful or careless actions.

HISTORY OF NAMING HURRICANES

Hurricanes have been around, shaping and changing the geography of our planet for millions of years. However, it was not until fairly recent history that the written word has played a role in the impact that hurricanes have on the human race, shaping politics, ideologies, and other conditions of society that impact not only the intensity of said hurricanes, but also our reactions, preparations and dominant understandings of hurricanes. The word “hurricane” originates from the Taino⁵ word “huracan” who was the god of evil in their indigenous culture (note: other reports state that “huracan” was simply the word for storm in the Taino language) (Oblack 1 and Erichsen 1). The god huracán is suspected to have evolved from the ancient Mayan god, “Hurakan”, the creator deity of wind, storm and fire (Oblack 1 and “Origin of the Word Hurricane”). When Spanish colonists arrived in these areas during the late 15th century, the Taino word “huracan” was quickly adopted by the Spanish (in the form “huracán”) as they encountered hurricane force storms on their journeys of conquest (Erichsen 1). English

⁵ The Taino peoples are a group of indigenous people in the Caribbean, most likely originating from South America.

speakers soon after learned of this word from the Spaniards, transforming it into the English form we are currently familiar with, “hurricane”.

The most recent system of hurricane naming the US currently uses has been around in its current form since 1978 (“Cyclone Naming History”). Initially, there was a need for a standardized system for naming hurricanes in order to simplify the communication process and avoid confusion⁶. Utilizing names to identify hurricanes proved to be a useful improvement in communication methods as it was now much easier to distinguish between storms when multiple storms arose at the same time, allowing for more accurate storm warnings. From 1953 until 1978 only female English names were used in the naming of hurricanes (male names, as well as French and Spanish names were added in 1978 as more female meteorologists were employed, pressuring the existing sexist naming system to end) (“Cyclone Naming History”).

A list of names for hurricanes that is recycled every six years is created and maintained by the World Meteorological Organization. The lists go in English alphabetical order and alternates between male and female names. Names remain on this list to be reused again in 6 years unless a storm is particularly catastrophic (e.g. Katrina), then it is removed because of “obvious reasons of sensitivity” (“Cyclone Naming History”). Removed names are then replaced by a name decided by the World Meteorological Organization. Of the names retired since this system was created, there have been 51 names retired between 1988 and 2016⁷ (29 years) compared to 31 names retired between 1954 and 1987 (34 years)(“Cyclone Naming History”). This signifies a

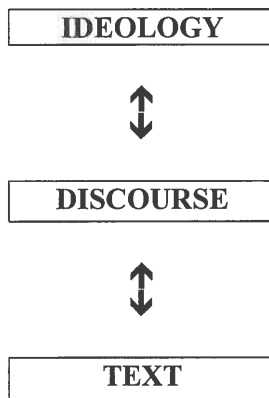
⁶ Before the current system of utilizing names for hurricanes was created, hurricanes were communicated via their latitude-longitude position.

⁷ This number can be assumed to be higher expecting at least Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria to all make the retired list of names from 2017, which has not yet been officially released.

significant increase in catastrophic hurricanes since the IPCC formally recognized the existence of anthropogenic climate change in 1988.

METHODOLOGY

I utilized a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach in order to deconstruct the news media discourse. More specifically, I looked for patterns of how natural disasters and climate change are talked about in relation to Hurricane Irma and then analyzed how those found patterns of language point to the ideological assumptions embedded in news coverage that is framed as “unbiased”. CDA is a methodology that highlights the implicit and complex relations between the text, discourse and ideology in an attempt to better understand how the relations between media language in a text and media discourse at large manifest in a dominant ideology, as well as how that ideology influences the discourse and therefore text.



“In CDA, ideology and sentence-level details are theoretically and methodologically connected through the concept of discourse.” (Powell 441). Discourse is both a textual

and a social practice, meaning studying the specifics of the language utilized in the text is representative of the discourse and can tell us a lot about the underlying ideology at play.

Discourse as a political practice establishes, sustains and changes power relations, and the collective entities (classes, blocs, communities, groups) between which power relations obtain. Discourse as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations. (Fairclough 67)

It's equally important to understand in CDA that due to the power behind discourse and its relations, each text analyzed within a discourse is understood in relation to the meanings of every other text within the same discourse.

One aspect of CDA is focusing on strategies of persuasion behind the text that make up the discourse. This essentially points to the importance of the institutional location and influence behind the discourse which shapes what a discourse produces as well as how audiences perceive said information. In CDA it is important to remember the intrinsic power behind dominant discourses like the news media discourse analyzed in this project. This intrinsic power is specifically connected to Foucault's power/knowledge theory that Gillian Rose outlines in her book stating:

Knowledge and power are imbricated one in the other, not only because all knowledge is discursive and all discourse is saturated with power, but because the most powerful discourses, in terms of the productiveness of their social effects, depend on assumptions and claims that their knowledge is true. (138)

What Rose is saying here is explicitly significant to this project in that it explains in part the value behind examining such a specific collection of texts. Within a discourse analysis one obtains the tools to uncover layers of hidden meaning in order to better understand the relations between text and discourse, between discourse and ideology and vice versa. Understanding these relations is central to understanding the importance of

the specific texts I am looking at in relation to their significance in the perception of climate change at large.

Foucault was interested in utilizing specific texts as a tool or a lens that revealed aspects of underlying discourses and ideologies and the relations between all three. This project aims to operate within this realm of thinking. By utilizing Hurricane Irma news media texts in order to understand the knowledges portrayed, one can gain insight into how capitalist ideologies, news media and climate uncertainty discourses all work relationally to create the current reigning “common sense” within our society about relating topics. Noël Sturgeon further relates this connection between nature and the ideological, discourse, and textual relationships in our society stating,

Nature plays an important role both materially and ideologically in our culture.../... But because “nature” and “natural” have such powerful and complex cultural resonances, the use of these concepts as tropes, metaphors, and dominant cultural narratives has the capacity to confuse and obscure our thinking about environmental policy. (17)

By analyzing and understanding the specific language as well as the power that said language is intrinsically related to, one can begin to uncover and understand the social workings that created the current dominant mode of functioning in order to understand how to hopefully alter it for the common good.

Within the confines of this project, I aim to ultimately gain a better understanding of how the contemporary news media discourse surrounding natural disasters misrepresents climate change, contributing to the current dominant climate change ideology of inaction and non-prioritization of the issue. Using critical discourse analysis to analyze the impact of the news coverage of Hurricane Irma on the public and political consciousness of climate change demonstrates how and why the normative ideological assumptions made in newspapers are problematic for climate change. The deliberately

politicized nature of CDA makes CDA an excellent tool to further understand the ideological happenings and power behind the implications of specific text tactics such as personifying hurricanes like Hurricane Irma in contemporary news media.

To begin my process I gathered newspaper articles from reputable nationally recognized newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The L.A. Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Tampa Bay Times*, in an attempt to gather a sense of how Hurricane Irma is viewed and portrayed all across the country. I gathered about 100 articles from these selected newspapers out of a total of 1,610 articles on “Hurricane Irma” within the database for said newspapers⁸. I utilized the database “ProQuest US Newsstream” in order to find my articles, and narrowed my search by limiting the publishing dates to the month of September 2017⁹.

While gathering my articles, I focused on headlines, trying to cover a wide variety of topics and perspectives, as well as achieve a relatively equal distribution of each newspaper, relative to their available articles on the topic. I began my search by specifically searching, ““Hurricane Irma” AND “climate change””, for which there were 46 results. I started with a focus on climate change in order to get a proper understanding for how climate change *is* represented in the media discourse surrounding Hurricane Irma, but also to get an initial statistical perspective on how many articles mentioned the possible contexts of climate change to the natural disaster. From there, I selected my

⁸ Upon further investigation of these 1,610 articles, it is important to note that within that entire selection contained a significant amount of the same articles that were listed multiple times. Therefore, the more accurate number of articles on “Hurricane Irma” not including repeat uploads of articles in the database is actually less than the noted 1,610 articles. I did not include the same article numerous times in my selection of articles for CDA.

⁹ Hurricane Irma hit the Caribbean in the first week of September 2017, and the U.S. shortly after, thus this time constraint for my articles allows for the coverage of before, during, and after the natural disaster in news media.

corpus based on the headline of each article, gathering a wide range of representation, as well as periodically specifically searching within specific newspapers to keep my selection representative of the overall article representation within the database. After gathering said articles I analyzed the discourses within these articles.

Within my corpus of 100 articles, the name “Irma” was specifically mentioned 647 times, which would equate to 6-7 times per article on average. While coding my corpus, I found patterns of the personification of Hurricane Irma. From this pattern I recognized, I analyzed specific examples of this personification of the storm to better understand how news media attempts to use natural disasters, specifically hurricanes, to remove human agency from the equation of climate change by contextual association. I focused heavily on the specific verbs “Irma performed” in specific sentences that actively personify Hurricane Irma in the overall news media discourse I analyzed. Irma was commonly referred to in these instances as: “Hurricane Irma”, “Irma, by she/her/hers pronouns, by “it” pronouns, “the storm” or “the hurricane”. Taking into account the multitude of ways in which Irma was referred to, Irma was personified 309 times within my entire corpus, or about 3 times per article on average. Utilizing this approach I was able to better understand how Irma’s characterization heavily constructed in the text is largely representative of the human vs. nature binary that plagues our dominant capitalist ideologies.

PERSONIFICATION OF IRMA

It’s no secret that the importance of learning and remembering history is to learn from the historical context we can uncover. This history of the word “hurricane” becomes

incredibly relevant as it entails the perception of hurricanes coming from godly origins, which has made its way into our contemporary uses and understandings of hurricane vernacular. As this project focuses heavily on the role of language in influencing social and political conditions, understanding the impact that language can have on societal understandings and actions is crucial. One article on the impact of the use of traditionally female vs. male name for hurricanes found a correlation between female named hurricanes and an increase in deaths resulting from said hurricanes. The study explains:

When hurricanes and other such events are tagged with specific yet arbitrary labels used for other categories (men/women, animals, flora), one may expect human responses to be influenced by the mental representations associated with those categories. Those representations may then influence subjective risk assessments or indeed any assessment relevant to the mental representation. Thus, a storm named for a flower may seem less threatening than one named for a raptor. Our findings highlight the need to reexamine the practice of assigning arbitrary names to natural hazards in an effort to facilitate communication. (Jung et al. 8,785)

Women's names are interpreted by U.S. society as less threatening. Therefore, it is dangerous to gender hurricanes by giving them women's names because of this interpretation. Names thus are a tool of power given their connections to gender in our patriarchal society. Thus, one can conclude that the language used to gender hurricanes has sexist implications as female-named storms are not seen to be as dangerous as male-named storms of the same intensity, materializing in reality by the lack of preparation action, thus resulting in more deaths. In addition to pointing to the important role of language in the construction of society, this study also serves as a great example of the real world implications of the personification of storms.

Regarding storms and natural disasters as godly can in certain perspectives seem as though it's an archaic, outdated idea in contemporary society. However, this notion of hurricanes as "outside of our control" still permeates throughout our modern day society

in the U.S., as seen in the ways in which news media portray Hurricane Irma and our relation as humans to natural disaster.

Colin Carman references Judith Butler, connecting her theories of gender construction and performance to nature, stating, “the dialectic of nature and culture, central to theories of social construction has a gendered subtext.” (Carman 508). Gendering something, being an act of personification, thus maintains relevance here once one considers that nature and varying elements of nature are most often gendered as feminine. Performance of gender doesn’t only impact the performer of said gender, in many ways learning what performance of certain gender categories looks like impacts how one interprets or understands “gender cues” performed by others. Thus, although nature and specifically Hurricane Irma are not able to consciously perform gender, the constructed notion of female remains a preconceived notion in most of society, heavily influencing the lens through which the rest of society views Hurricane Irma through. Nature is often rendered as being passive, a classically feminine quality. It is necessary for nature to be deemed passive in order for its place as a primary source of exploitation in the capitalist system to be seamlessly accepted as part of the “common sense” knowledge of dominant American ideologies that manifest in undeniably intentionally masculine qualities, otherwise known as the patriarchy.

The patriarchy manifests itself in a plethora of purposefully covert ways, most often obscured by the power of naturalization combined with other complex, invisible tactics of hegemonic power. Part of nature being assumed as “Other” or the opposite of

human, is exhibited in this construction of nature as female, asserting society's dominance over nature as "natural" and "undeniable".

IF THEY COULD THEY WOULD CALL IRMA A "BITCH"

One dominant manifestation of this personification of Irma I recognized through coding my corpus is that of portraying Irma as violent or angry through the use of a wide variety of verbs that are actions typically done by humans. Not only is this proof of personification, but adds a dangerous level of autonomy to the "actions" of Irma.

The aspect that is of particular interest in this context is when nature takes a sudden sharp turn towards natural disasters, demanding to be recognized for its unpredictable destructive abilities. When this happens, nature is suddenly not personified as *passive feminine* anymore, but rather as *aggressive, violent*, but still, *feminine*. Some pockets of American society might identify this description as a "bitch"¹⁰. While I don't condone or agree with the sentiment of associating Irma with the word "bitch", the common association is important to unmask as we explore the construction of "Irma's persona" in news media representation. Cronon also cites an instance of the use of bitch to describe nature in media. He states, "As one man wrote to *Time* magazine following the Northridge quake, 'If Mother Nature has proved one thing, it is that she can be a real bitch.'" (Cronon 48). In the news media sources I pulled from, profanities are not permitted, so journalists instead have to use alternative adjectives and verbs to paint a clear picture for their audiences where the obvious assumption to be made about Irma is that she's a "bitch". We see this in the case of how Irma is personified in news media,

¹⁰ In this context "bitch" refers to the definition, "a malicious, spiteful or overbearing woman" or "something[one] that is extremely difficult, objectionable or unpleasant" ("Bitch" 1).

characterized as the objective enemy, described to perform acts like: “threaten”, “slam”, and “barrel” to justify society’s inability to fully control nature and the possible outcomes of such a natural disaster of spectacle (Dieterich, Chris et al. 1; de Córba 1; Joseph et al. 1).

If Irma were still characterized as passive nature while exhibiting such erratic and intimidating qualities, in comparison to such a domineering force, society could only be assumed to be weak if it could not control something so supposedly passive. Some of the most notable examples of this from my corpus are:

- “We are about to get punched in the face by this storm” (McDonnell et al. 1)
- “IRMA RACKS FLORIDA; Hurricane weakens but still pummels city after city, and it’s not done yet” (McDonnell et al. 1)
- “Irma hit so hard that she blasted the paint right off” (Carlton 1)

Within these examples we see Irma, “punch [us] in the face”, “rack Florida”, “pummel city after city”, and “hit so hard that she blasted the paint right off” (McDonnell et. al. 1; Carlton 1). Irma is clearly and directly associated with each of these actions, all of which are objectively violent against humans. There are dozens more examples like these which all convey Irma as an angry perpetrator. Understanding news media’s decision to personify Irma in this way is the foundation upon which society views Irma as an obvious public enemy. This normalization of Irma in this way creates the conditions so that no one thinks to question that they may have in fact helped mold this public enemy to its extreme status.

This intersects with the constructed humans vs. nature binary within which nature is most often gendered (an act of personification) as female. Dominant masculine ideologies of patriarchal control effectively “Other” aggressive forms of femininity, which in this instance serve as a catalyst for constructing Irma as the absolute, objective enemy at fault for her destruction. This further alienates humans from nature as it refuses to reveal human’s role in the destruction of Irma. By failing to admit any responsibility of human’s actions in the existence and potential destruction of the storm, U.S. citizens can continue living in blissful ignorance of how their actions are linked to the environment around them and ultimately climate change. Painting a picture of Irma as incredibly angry or violent aids in constructing Irma as “Other”. More specifically, the two work together in order to naturalize Irma as “demonic other” as part of societal common sense that once again, reinforces nature’s position at the opposite side of the binary (Cronon 48).

Cronon’s notion of “demonic other” is very applicable to this project in that it can be applied to both Hurricane Irma as well as climate change itself. “At whatever scale we experience them, these things represent a nonhuman world that despite our best efforts we never quite succeed in fully controlling” (Cronon 48). If Irma can be successfully labeled by news media as both a “bitch” and as “Other”, audiences most likely won’t sympathize or connect to the storm nor their own actions in relation to creating this “bitchy Other”. When the entire audience is being directly impacted by a natural disaster and simultaneously bombarded with news media that personifies Irma as this bitchy “Othered” outsider, the audience has no reason to think about themselves and how they may have contributed to the creation of this “Otherly bitch monster”.

IRMA AS “DEMONIC OTHER”

Through the investigation of the personification of Hurricane Irma in news media, a prevalent pattern of “Othering” emerges. Hurricane Irma is repeatedly “Othered” in an attempt to label Irma as the scapegoat. This scapegoating via “Othering” of Irma is a tool of manipulation and power, successfully eliminating in the minds of society any need to take responsibility or accountability for how human actions have indeed, at least in part caused our own suffering from these hurricanes.

As Hurricane Irma is repeatedly scapegoated within news media, it becomes “common sense” knowledge to audiences. When the knowledge of the dominant news media discourse becomes a regime of unquestioned truth, we find many manifestations of exploitation and devaluing of nature that often go unnoticed by the general public. This lack of cognizance over *how* and *when* news media is influencing one’s knowledge creates a subjectivity that then supports the existing power regime. The “Othering” of Irma coupled with this general lack of cognizance of media influence creates the perfect conditions for alienating humans from the consequences of their actions by blaming Irma. A few examples of this within my corpus are:

“Now that Hurricane Irma has staggered through Florida like a drunken tourist”

(Danielson et al. 1).

“No one invited Irma to their party last week, but she showed up anyway, waylaying the carefully-laid plans of numerous non profits” (Scherzer 1).

The language of the “natural” is utilized here in order to justify and normalize Irma (and more generally, nature) as “demonic other”, stopping society from questioning reality and nature’s “Othered”, ostracized, and exploited position in reality. By using language that describes Irma as a “drunken tourist” or as an uninvited guest, Irma is constructed as careless, the enemy, as well as something that we could do *nothing* about. We know this isn’t true, as Irma’s record breaking force in the Caribbean as well as the multiple hurricanes that accompanied Irma in the Atlantic are known to be a result of our exploitation of the environment. In other words, the exploitation of nature as “Other”. This repeated allusion to an unwelcome houseguest is a quick, straightforward method for a journalist to communicate to audiences that Irma is the “Other”, the enemy or the offender. This is reinforced in this example as Irma is said to “waylay the carefully-laid plans of numerous non profits”. Non profits here represent humans as a whole, and are a clever choice as non profits are an altruistic, humanitarian, charitable entity that symbolizes the benevolent, innocent victim, humans. Irma is described to “waylay” the “carefully-laid plans”, illustrating Irma as careless and inconsiderate.

This labeling of Irma as “Other” is done in order to further reinforce Irma and nature’s subordinate relation to the rest of the U.S. population. As a common “invisible” tactic of establishing, maintaining and reinforcing power, “Othering” has the power to make nature easier to control and exploit due to its *naturalized*, constructed inferior position in the societal hierarchy. “Othered” nature can also be *blamed* for environmental destruction despite our elite hyperconsumption habits being a driving force behind the destruction (Di Chiro 311). My corpus has provided proof of news media reliance on *blaming* Irma as the “Other” in order to naturalize U.S. human dominance over nature.

Repetitive use by news media discourse of tactics like these that naturalize “Othering”, constructs the “Other” as an unquestioned regime of truth. Regimes of truth are just one form of knowledge that discourse produces, ultimately becoming a highly effective weapon of power as society internalizes said knowledge as “common sense” (Storey 132).

IRMA AS PERPRETRATOR & HUMANS AS VICTIM

While it is true that for most of history hurricanes have been completely outside of our control, the introduction of climate change has changed that crucial element of control to some extent. While there is uncertainty within the scientific community around what the exact manifestations of climate change will look like, many studies have proven that the warming of the planet has and will increasingly continue to cause more intense hurricanes than we previously have experienced (Geng and Sugi 2262; Marciano et.al. 486; Mizuta et.al. 6456). In contemporary times we are faced with the reality that many of our actions as humans with agency have and continue to contribute to climate change which is rapidly intensifying the rate of hurricanes occurrence. This is integral, as it permits humans to have agency in the fight against a hurricane. This agency only exists in the proactive sphere, a sphere which is generally not common territory for public policy nor media discourse. Throughout my analyses I have found multiple accounts of language manipulated in order to eliminate any notion of human agency from the existence or causation of Hurricane Irma. One example of this elimination of agency through the allusion of a loss of control is seen here:

“Without rhyme or reason, Irma plucked the steeple clean off a small church.”(Carlton 1).

In this example from *The Tampa Bay Times* we see evidence of the pathological desire for control, which roots from capitalism’s dependence on exploitation, which has historically manifested in colonial crusades. Again, Irma is painted as the “demonic other” beyond our control, with the use of the words “without rhyme or reason”, which presents Irma as this reckless, careless being, making Irma out to be the obvious enemy in the situation (Carlton 1). Then we see who is subject to Irma’s reckless wrath as “Irma plucked”, another verb that indicates Irma using *force* against the victim (Carlton 1). The victim being once again, humans, as the thing Irma plucked was “the steeple clean off a small church” (Carlton 1). Describing the church as “small” doubly reinforces humans as the victim and Irma as a vicious perpetrator as it paints the victim as weak and helpless against Irma’s wrath. Using an example in which a church was mutilated is a strategic choice on behalf of *The Tampa Bay Times*. The use of the church here serving as the victim in the situation is a choice that renders Irma as even more of an “evil” offender. The church is seen as a holy, untouchable sanctuary. In different scenarios in news media when churches are damaged or demolished in any way the offender is described as a terrorist or some form of criminal depending on the situation.

Unlike how terrorist situations are often reacted to with increased police force by the state to assert dominance and control, the defense lines against natural disasters is left mostly to the individual in times of crisis. People were told to use sandbags and boarded up windows to stand a chance against “Irma’s wrath” (Halper 1). “Often when we label a problem as ‘natural,’ we imply that there’s not much we can do about it. It’s just the way

things are, and we'd better get used to it." (Cronon 30). So, when the enemy is a *natural* disaster, like Hurricane Irma, it leaves us (the victim) powerless as well as ignorant of our own relationship to the *cause* of the enemy itself. We see this complete loss of control over the situation alternately articulated in an example from a headline in *The L.A. Times*.

"Keys brace for Irma's fury; Hurricane takes aim at Florida's west coast" (Cherwa and Halper 1).

In this example language is manipulated in a way to cast humans as objective victim, and Hurricane Irma as the offender. First in the sentence we see "Keys brace", the "Keys" representing humans in this example, and "brace" indicating here a need for humans to stand strong against an attack (Cherwa and Halper 1). This becomes clearer as we see that humans are bracing for "Irma's fury", which paints Irma again as the "angry bitch" persona discussed earlier, presenting a threat to humanity in this headline (Cherwa and Halper 1). This victim/offender relationship is reinforced in the second half of the headline when Irma "takes *aim at Florida's* west coast" (Cherwa and Halper 1). Taking aim requires agency, a quality that is not typically seen in erratic natural disasters, thus is substantial evidence of personification. Taking aim is also an action that, outside of sports, is generally intended as a threat. Before a reader would even get the chance to read the contents of this article, they are bombarded with language that personifies Hurricane Irma as well as paints a clear and concise picture of Irma as enemy and human as victim, both of which successfully remove any responsibility for the storm from humans. William Cronon mirrors this sentiment when he says "When we become

victims, these things [natural disasters] are never our fault.” (Cronon 50). Viewing humans as the objective and only victims in this situation requires labeling Hurricane Irma again as “demonic other” as the storm is something otherworldly and entirely out of our control as victims.

It’s particularly interesting how this fear of loss of control hasn’t surfaced in the instance of climate change. It seems that willful ignorance combined with an abundance of misunderstandings of climate science have amounted to the misperception of climate change as a non-threat to U.S. society (by civilians i.e.; the ones receiving the narrative). This attitude of blissful ignorance is captured here as Cronon says, “Treating such things [environmental problems] as normal and inevitable in effect naturalizes them, placing them beyond our control and excusing us from having to take responsibility for them, making it easier to pretend that they have little or nothing to do with our actions.” (Cronon 31).

A large component of climate change being seen as a non-threat is a misunderstanding of the current state of climate change as well as a higher expectation of what modern day technology can accomplish. “Nearly 60%” of people who believe in climate change, still subscribe to the “wait and see” mentality, thinking that there are little to no negative repercussions if we wait to see how bad climate change manifests in the future (Sterman and Sweeney 214). The reasoning behind this mode of thinking is incredibly problematic in that it insists on waiting until there are blatant signs of an existing problem in order to put forth any resources to mitigate any risk. This mindset clearly does not understand the notion of economic risk in regard to climate change, of which subscribing to “wait and see” politics will in turn have greater economic, social

and political cost rather than putting forth attention and resources to mitigate such consequences (Callison 162).

There is a capitalist desire for ultimate control, as control is essentially a synonym for power. Fear, often masked as considering “risks”, guides capitalist decisions. Therefore, the fear over the loss of control, which surfaces in every instance of natural disasters threatening U.S. soil, is a driving force behind the personification and “Othering” of Hurricane Irma in news media. These risks include both safety and economic risks, which were both very real considering the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season was record breaking in terms of number of major hurricanes as well as in terms of monetary damage¹¹. Fear was justifiably abundant during this time to be manipulated by news media institutions. Climate change and related consequences like hurricanes present a very real threat to the current model of late stage capitalism as it relies on infinite growth and consumption, which in turn exasperates the effects climate change. Current systems of existing power like news media are having to find ways to navigate around this newfound altered shift in power, where the environment is starting to claim back dominance. Rather than acknowledging our role in igniting this power shift, news media often employs masking and displacing techniques like “Othering” and fear of a loss of control to maintain dominant ideologies.

Personification, is an incredibly commonly used trope within news media discourse in order to construct the narrative of natural disasters, most iconically, hurricanes. Given the pervasive nature of personification within hurricane news media

¹¹ The 2017 Atlantic hurricane season broke records costing over \$200 billion in damages (Drye 1). The previous record was set during the iconic 2005 hurricane season with Hurricane Katrina, which cost \$159 billion (Drye 1).

discourse, it is imperative to bring to attention that personification is “a distortion of reality” which has a ripple effect of impacts throughout relating discourses and ideologies (Nishimura 93). In American literature and media discourse, the personification of nature (e.g. sun, moon, sea, earth, seasons as human) is repeatedly utilized for a wide variety of intentions, yet the American public generally doesn’t see ourselves as nature. We see this exemplified within my corpus as Irma has been gendered, “Othered” and labeled as a “scapegoat” for consequences that are at least in part our own doing. It is central to remember that ultimately the purpose of each text analyzed in this project is to make money. News media is a capitalist enterprise, and therefore headlines and news need to attract an audience in order to make money and continue existing. Thus, the exploitation and “demonic othering” of nature employed by news media has primarily the interest of maintaining the current world order built off of our society’s colonialist, exploitive foundations.

CONCLUSION: COMPLEX PROBLEMS REQUIRE COMPLEX SOLUTIONS

We are currently at a turning point in our history where we can either begin to recognize our problematic ideologies, discourses and texts, or we can remain stagnant in ignorance about how our actions, institutions and dominant ideological ways of thinking about our relations to the environment impact the world around us. We have seen and explored this manifestation of this two-way ripple effect of ignorance and misunderstanding radiate between Hurricane Irma texts into news media discourse and capitalist ideology and vice versa. As I have clearly argued, our actions have very real world effects like climate change. Therefore, it is incredibly important now more than

ever, to hold our dominant institutions (like news media outlets) accountable as we understand the ramifications of false ideas being spread and true ideas being misunderstood as is the case with Hurricane Irma and climate change in news media. We have seen how something as seemingly innocent as the personification of a natural disaster can be uncovered and reveal its intrusive tendencies to falsely guide the American public towards a stance of uninvolved bystander or victim rather than an active contributor to climate change and its consequences.

Current modes of thinking about climate change, and relating environmental factors are deeply engrained in our society on multiple levels. Perhaps the most damaging deeply engrained notion of all is that *not thinking* about the environment or how our actions, thoughts, words and discussions about it have real life impacts on us, the environment and other humans in the form of natural disasters like Hurricane Irma, rising sea levels, droughts, and forest fires (just to name a few). This manipulative ability to make an entire nation that is one of the largest contributors to climate change *not think* or understand the relation between their actions and the declining state of the environment is proof of the power that the current dominant ideological system holds over us. In tandem with all things being framed and normalized within this humans vs. nature hierarchal binary system, we see those in power utilizing masking and displacing by misrepresenting climate change in media in order to maintain their hegemonic dominance in society (Hall 337).

We need some serious reform to how we talk, think and relate to nature. While that would be spectacular if that could happen with the stroke of the governmental pen, realistically speaking given our current administration and high percentages of people

who vastly misunderstand these pressing environmental issues of our times, these changes will most likely predominantly come from individual texts first rather than dominant discourses or ideologies. News media is just one facet of dominant knowledge distribution that although as previously discussed, by no means is a solitary influencer in the societal mindset of contemporary times. That being said, by changing the *language* utilized in articles about anything environmental, specifically demonstrated here through the example of natural disaster Hurricane Irma, changes can be seen in how we value nature as well as view ourselves as part of nature.

As goes with the philosophy behind CDA, the textual level changes will have a ripple effect, thus influencing changes in the discourse and ideological levels of society. In time, this ripple effect throughout various discourses and ideologies can begin to shorten the constructed divide between humans and nature as society becomes more familiarized with alternative lenses through multiple differing possible tools of empowerment like language. These broadened ideologies can be normalized into the dominant hegemonic ideology and absorbed into our idea of “common sense” over time.

Candis Callison in her book, *How Climate Change Comes to Matter*, outlines a range of studied, tested suggestions how to improve our climate change communication tactics and strategies. These range from shifting away from confusing scientific jargon that is often and easily misunderstood by journalists and the public, to reframing climate change as an economic risk if not invested in, to understanding *who* says something matters much more to most people rather than *what* is said. The misunderstandings of climate change and passion behind climate skeptics and deniers is deeply engrained within our society, and thus requires a complex, indefinitely developing communication

system that can combine with climate science that can transform our society's dominant understanding our role in anthropogenic climate change. In our deeply polarized country it is increasingly important to navigate our way to operating within a spectrum of ideology rather than our current binary system. By operating within a spectrum and reframing climate change and environmental activism to appear less "extreme" or "offensive", hopefully more people will be able to identify themselves as climate believers or even environmentalists by not feeling personally attacked.

In an increasingly polarized and closed-minded world, it can seem obvious to focus all fronts of action on assimilating climate change belief into the cultural common sense. While this is a worthy and necessary cause, it's only half the battle. Ample amount of attention needs to be given to communicating to people I will label as "passive climate believers" the importance of immediate individual and systemic action on climate change. While often benevolent at heart, these "passive climate believers" may believe climate change is a result of "natural" climate fluctuations, or may not yet understand the full impact of their actions on the environment. This is because we purposely do not have many systems of education in place to properly educate the public on the unsustainability of our society's current consumption and exploitation habits.

We need multiple modes of education in order to ensure a society with people who are well-informed on pressing issues. The current model of adult education relies primarily on varying sources of news media (e.g. broadcasting, print news, online publications) which currently has the power to define for society: what the issues are, why they are important, how we look at these issues, and what we can do about said issues. That is a tremendous amount of responsibility to leave to the corporate-owned

news media industry alone, which leaves news media with an unfair and unethical amount of power to control knowledge in society. While there is a lot to be gained from improving the landscape of news media, without other systems of accountability in place to provide competing educational information on “the issues”, there is no way to ensure an elimination of a misrepresentation of issues like climate change from media discourse.

It is important to bring up that current science cannot prove that Hurricane Irma or any one individual hurricane was specifically caused or intensified by climate change. Science *does* overwhelmingly support the notion that hurricanes like Hurricane Irma are being increasingly intensified as a consequence of climate change (Geng and Sugi 2262; Mizuta et al. 6456; Marciano et al. 468). The record breaking 2017 Atlantic hurricane season stands to support that as we witnessed Hurricanes Franklin, Gert, Harvey, Irma, Jose, Katia, Lee, Maria, Nate and Ophelia arrive one after the other, without a significant rise in awareness around their climate change context. Thus, my choice of Hurricane Irma was based on sufficient U.S. news media coverage at the time of starting this project, as well as witnessing an interesting trend of insidious language that negatively gendered and personified Irma as the scapegoat enemy used in news media as discussed earlier.

I would also like to acknowledge the apparent contradiction between viewing both the personification of Hurricane Irma *and* the humans vs. nature binary as problematic. While personification can be a tool used to bridge this constructed gap between humans and nature by presenting the two as interrelated or as one in the same, that is not how personification was used within my corpus. We have seen that although Hurricane Irma was personified, she was personified as “Other”, as the enemy, as

separate from us. Thus, the problem at its core is not *that* Irma was personified, but rather *how* Irma was personified. More specifically, *how* Irma was personified actively aided in alienating society from our actions, relieving us of any responsibility for the destruction we helped create.

As the negative impacts of climate change rise yearly, it is my hope that this fight against climate uncertainty will end sooner than later. Thus, future projects related to this topic can and should further explore *how* to combat climate change from a variety of differing perspectives: individual, societal, global, political, economic, industrial, etc. Once climate certainty has been molded into dominant understandings of the world, it is still important to look further into *how* and *why* messages on climate change are being communicated the way they are. It is not enough to believe in climate change; people and industries must adjust their actions to help mitigate climate change. The negative impacts of climate change are slow moving and incredibly threatening even though experts aren't yet certain about the full extent of those consequences. As we witness and experience increasingly obvious and clear manifestations of the power behind climate change, we will see mitigating the effects of climate change rise as a priority. This requires a revolutionary shift in power, knowledge and ideology for the western world to ultimately prioritize nature over profit. It is certainly possible then, in my opinion, that by changing the specific *language* we use to talk about and understand all environmental matters on an individual level, then we can begin to see a shift in discursive and ideological understandings of nature as something to be better understood rather than conquered, exploited or controlled.

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